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ABSTRACT

Participatory curriculum evaluation can be a powerful force for curriculum improvement in local school districts. The evaluation process contains nine steps: (1) the curriculum area needing evaluation is identified; (2) the local board of education organizes an evaluation committee reflecting school communities or neighborhoods, organizational levels of administrators and teachers, and differing points of view about the subject, as well as the full range of constituencies served; (3) questions about the current program are raised in brainstorming sessions; (4) the research design is formulated; (5) instruments are developed and data are collected; (6) the data are analyzed; (7) recommendations and action plans are developed based on the findings; (8) the evaluation report is submitted to the board of education for approval; and (9) program recommendations are implemented. Examples of participatory evaluation in action are provided in this document, and the value of the participatory nature of the process as indicated in the literature is underscored. (PGD)

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Public School Curriculum Improvement through Participatory Evaluation

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There are 15,000 school districts in the United States. Over 90% of them have 10,000 pupils or fewer. Approximately 70% of the K-12 students attend schools in those districts. This paper develops the proposition that curriculum improvement is possible in many of those districts through participatory evaluation.

Curricular improvement is primarily concerned with improved pupil performance--pupils who are achieving at higher levels, who have better understanding of concepts and knowledge and who can apply and transfer knowledge and skills better. Students who are challenged to a greater degree, who more frequently are working at the limits of their ability are the results of improved curriculum. An improved curriculum provides students with more appropriate learning goals, objectives and content. An improved curriculum enhances learning through more appropriate experiences. It offers students more frequent opportunities to excel. An improved curriculum maximizes time available to learn. Student productivity increases and feelings of competence and self esteem result from improved curriculum.

Curriculum improvement is a process--it seldom comes about in quantum leaps. Measurable improvement in student learning in basic school subjects is possible in periods of time of a year or less as a result of curricular improvements. There is a natural tendency for basic school and school district curriculum programs such as math, physical education and social studies to regress toward the mean. Excellent programs with high student performance--programs with good instructional materials, well trained teachers, and quality instructional goals have a natural tendency to regress toward the

mean. Teacher attrition without the necessary training of replacements, failure to replace instructional materials, or to allow instructional time to be pre-empted are all everyday occurrances which cause quality programs to regress.

Conversely, basic school programs (math, physical education, social studies) which are of very low quality with resultant poor student performance also have a natural tendency to regress toward the mean. Teacher or administrative changes, state mandates, or replacing texts that are out of print, can cause the poorest programs to improve somewhat.

Participatory curriculum evaluation is presented here as a powerful force for curriculum improvement in local school districts--a force which improves strong curriculum programs and slows their regression toward the mean--a force which can substantially improve poor programs. The end result is citizens in a school district being able to look at all of their curriculum programs as the citizens of Lake Wobegon look at their children and find that they are all above average.

The school curriculum is set in a dynamic social system of students, parents, teachers, administrators, citizens, board of education members, state departments of education, state legislatures, and local, state and national events. This context is utilized in the participatory process. The important actors in the local school district are involved in the participatory evaluation process.

I have organized or led about a dozen participatory curriculum evaluations. The nine step process outlined below best characterizes the process.

Step 1. Identifying a Curricular Area. The Board of Education, administration, staff, or parents may participate in identifying a curriculum subject or program that needs to be evaluated. Basic content fields such as K-12 math, or reading are good choices for initial evaluation projects. Often there is districtwide consensus, based upon pupil performance, parental discontent, and/or needs stated by faculty members to evaluate a particular program.

Step 2. Organizing the Committee. An evaluation committee is formed by the Board of Education. It is important that the Board initiate the first evaluation. The Superintendent or another administrator, teacher or layperson may head up the committee. A grid of instructional levels, geographic areas and power groups is a useful tool for selecting a committee. A third grade teacher at Smith School may actually represent a strong mathematics education point of view while also representing a school and the teachers' Union. Committee membership should reflect: school communities or neighborhoods, organizational levels of administrators and teachers, and differing points of view about the subject to be evaluated. Board members, central office administrators, teachers at various school levels, parents, knowledgeable citizens and, where appropriate, students, should be represented. A critical question about committee membership is: "Will all important sub-public groups of the community be represented on the committee and will these committee members communicate with their constituencies as the evaluation proceeds?" Fifteen members is a good size.

Step 3. Developing the Evaluation Questions. At an initial meeting of the committee after district program goals are reviewed the Chairperson leads or has led a brainstorming session designed to raise evaluation questions about the program under study. Questions about pupil performance, teaching, time, instructional materials, are likely to be raised. These questions are placed in priority order and organized for study. This is an open listing of all concerns about the program stated as questions. All questions are accepted.

Step 4. Developing a Research or Data Collection Design. The committee, often in a sub-committee format, decides what studies will be conducted to answer

the important evaluation questions and how these studies will be organized so that the evaluation can be as efficient and unobtrusive as possible. Committee members are often knowledgeable of where existing test scores, data bases, course descriptions, curriculum guides, and other information about the program may be found. Dropping or modifying or adding research questions is negotiated at this time because of limited time or resources. Special interests are accommodated. An overall design of studies is created.

Step 5. Developing Instruments and Collecting Data. Based upon the research design tests are developed or purchased, questionnaires written, students tested, staff members surveyed, classrooms observed, and parents interviewed. Curriculum may be compared to national models. Other information is collected.

Step 6. Analyzing Data and Determining Findings. The research data is reviewed and findings determined. Sub-committees may make presentations to the committee as a whole about specific studies. Conclusions are drawn from the studies. An evaluation report begins to take shape with committee questions being answered by research data and findings.

Step 7. Developing Recommendations for Program Improvement and Action Plans for their Implementation. The recommendations are developed from the various findings, and plans with timelines and estimated budgets are prepared for the recommendations. This is an important time of debate and negotiations about future directions for the program. Should low student performance in a course or grade level be rectified by more practice and drill or more experiential activities?

Step 8. Presentation for Acceptance and/or Approval by the Board of Education. The committee presents the evaluation to the Board of Education for acceptance and tentative approval of the action plans at a formal meeting of the Board. Since the various school district constituencies have been "represented" and informed along the way there are no major surprises at this presentation meeting. Board members on the committee have informed Board members. Teachers have informed teachers, Union members, Union members, parents, PTA groups, and so forth. The findings, recommendations and action plans are presented to the

Board at a reception, sandwich supper or a formal Board meeting.

Step 9. Implementation of Program Recommendations. The administration prepares more specific budgetary requirements and plans for implementing the program improvement recommendations of the evaluation. The Evaluation Committee may meet periodically to review program improvement progress and oversee formative evaluations of the curriculum improvement activities. The most important outcome of the process is the commitment of committee members to improvement--to buying new texts, to inservice training, to better testing. The committee becomes a network of support for and commitment to improvement which persists over time.

A committee has met 6 or 8 times over six months and raised questions, gathered data, negotiated, argued, compromised over many important issues. They have presented findings, recommendations and specific improvement plans to a board of education and have monitored improvements.

During one of my early involvements in the participatory evaluation of a K-12 social studies program, the committee had data which showed that about one-fourth of the high school students were failing U.S. History, a State requirement, and that it was the least liked social studies course on a student survey. A debate grew between committee members about a recommendation and an action plan for this problem between two divergent opinions, "U.S. History is the most important course, let them take it again if they flunk it" and "Yes, it's important, but let's make it more interesting." The result was agreement to require the course in 10th grade rather than 11th where fewer courses were required and to develop three offerings all with a common criterion referenced test for those important basics of U.S. History. This resulted in three courses for student

selection: "American Studies" (a cultural approach fully integrated with English and team taught), "Topics in U.S. History" (a thematic approach partially integrated with English and team taught), and a traditional chronological approach. There was financial support from the Board of Education for extensive curriculum development. The result was that failures were substantially reduced and an innovative program persists 10 years later.

In an evaluation of fine arts the committee, using data from a state assessment instrument, found that little was being done in our district in art appreciation or aesthetics. A recommendation resulted in curriculum development support and the implementation of a K-12 appreciation strand integrated into all visual art instruction units.

These are but two examples of commitment to improvement and ingenuity in implementation that would be most difficult to accomplish without a participatory approach.

There has been a turn from the rational claim to leadership for bureaucracies--the only legitimate claim, according to Weber, to a more participatory, democratic approach. The rational model for curriculum improvement has the Superintendent, the Board and central administration planning for and implementing improvement. This model always requires the three basic questions of a formative evaluation for a program change to be answered: 1. Were the books ordered? 2. Did they arrive? 3. Were the boxes opened? If the answer to those three questions is "yes", the fourth question is always, "Is anyone using them?" Cronbach (1980), summarizes this conflict between reationalism and participation, "The rationalist ideal of efficiency is in tension with the ideal of democratic participation."

Peters and Waterman's In Search of Excellence points out the failure of rational leadership and decision making. This approach has brought us "big is better," "analyze everything," "get rid of disturbers of the peace," "managers are decision makers," "control everything," and other principles that have often failed. Common (1983) has warned against the rational centralized top down reform of curriculum.

The evaluation literature is replete with warnings about the usability of evaluations which are accomplished by evaluators for decision makers. These evaluations are often ignored or misused. The important terms here are "evaluators" and "evaluation". "Evaluators" are assumed to be professionally trained persons with strong research skills who work for an organization--most frequently under a contract--to produce a product for the organization called an "evaluation". The data, observations, findings, conclusions and possibly recommendations in the evaluation may be used by the organization for decision making (go, modify, no go).

Participatory evaluation is a process. It is a continuous flow of activities. There is often an evaluation report which is the centerpiece of the process, but program improvements begin before the report is completed and evaluation activities continue after the report is published.

Our participatory evaluation of a basic school subject produced early data on teacher time spent teaching the subject. A preliminary data array showed a few teachers spending almost no time in the program. The evaluation committee thought that should be investigated, and if correct, rectified immediately. Those actions were

taken long before a report was produced. Formative evaluations of recommended improvements to the program made in the report are continuously undertaken. Recommendations and action plans guide program improvements over a long period of time, most frequently several years. They often call for improving the evaluative information on student performance in a program so that performance can be monitored and improved. Committee members have gone to conferences and brought back program improvement ideas which could be used by the evaluation committee before recommendations were made.

Janis (1977) has presented a five stage decision making process which leads to a stable decision: 1. appraising the challenge; 2. surveying alternatives; 3. weighing alternatives; 4. deliberating about commitment; and 5. adhering to the decision despite negative feedback. These stages apply to both individual and group decision making. In describing stage 4, deliberating about commitment, during a group decision making process he states:

> ...the group setting makes for more intense commitment to the new course of action. The public nature of a group decision and the references to group norms make each member realize that once a consensus has been reached, he is expected to adhere to it...When members participate in a dicussion and reach a consensus, they immediately feel committed to carry out the group decision...The group provides members with social support, enabling each one to withstand criticism during stage 5 better than he might if he alone were responsible...

The group process of deciding between alternative recommendations during the participatory evaluation process develops group solidarity and commitment to the recommendations and action plans for improvement. A ceremonial such as a dinner with the Board of Education and the evaluation committee, or a coffee hour, or a

joint public meeting where the committee presents outline findings and recommendations to the Board of Education and the Board accepts the evaluation report, can symbolically cement the commitment of the committee to the evaluation and is so perceived by Board of Education members. The communication of committee members to their school, parent or community constituencies with respect to evaluation progress also helps to solidify the commitment of individuals to program improvement.

Homan's (1950) proposition regarding the increased frequency of interaction between two or more persons increasing the degree of their liking for one another is evident in the participatory process. The many meetings, expressions of differences, negotiations, and accommodations of committee members contributes to feelings of solidarity and commitment and creates a friendship and collegial network for future improvement activities.

House (1981)has taken the position that a public evaluation needs to be true, credible, and right in order to be valid. A curriculum evaluation for a school system must result in improvement in pupil performance in order to be effective, or at least not result in diminished pupil performance. For that to happen there has to be an acceptance of findings and action taken on the recommendations. The 2 x 2 below juxtaposes these two dimensions of the evaluation process creating four general types of evaluation outcomes.

Results in Valid Findings and Recommendations	Results in acceptance of the findings and actions consistent with the recommendations: Yes	Results in acceptance of the findings and actions consistent with the recommendations: No
YES	1 Valid evaluation and implementation of recommendations	2 Valid evaluation and rejection of recommendations
NO	3 Invalid evaluation and implementation of recommendations	4 Invalid evaluation and rejection of recommendations

While the major problem of "evaluations" done by "evaluators" for agencies is shown in cell 2, a valid evaluation is accomplished and it is rejected by the agency because it lacks credibility, the major problem with the participatory evaluation process is found in cell 3. An invalid evaluation--one that is not based upon true results--will have its recommendations fully implemented.

Utilizing a professional evaluator in the participatory process can improve the validity of the evaluation. Expertise in design instrumentation and data analysis can make important differences in validity. The role of the professional evaluator is that of a member of the committee and an important contributor of ideas and skills rather than a contracted evaluator doing the evaluation.

Participatory evaluation has been presented here as an evaluation process that can play an important role in improving the curriculum and student performance in many school districts.

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